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C O N F I D E N T I A L SEOUL 001187

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TAGS: MARR PGOV PINS KN KS

SUBJECT: GENERAL SHARP'S INTRODUCTORY CALL ON DEFMIN LEE

Classified By: AMB. ALEXANDER VERSHBOW. REASONS 1.4 (b/d).

¶1. (C) SUMMARY: General Walter "Skip" Sharp, the new Commander UNC/CFC/USFK, paid an introductory call on the ROK Minister of National Defense Lee Sang-hee on June 10. General Sharp, accompanied by Ambassador Vershbow, stated that his predecessor had done much to strengthen the U.S.-ROK Alliance and that it was his intent to build upon that to make the Alliance even better prepared as we look to the future. Minister Lee warmly welcomed General Sharp to Korea.

He described what he thought were the three most important missions of the CFC Commander: 1) maintaining force readiness, 2) preparing the new plans and structures for OPCON transfer, and 3) managing U.S.-ROK Alliance issues in ways that would help to strengthen our security relations in the future. Minister Lee spent some time on the need for Koreans and Americans to better understand one another's cultures and to use that understanding to resolve Alliance concerns. General Sharp responded that Washington desires to better understand Korea today, but cautioned that the perceptions of the U.S. Congress toward Korea are also of great import. Lee concluded with the message that President Lee wants to bring back U.S.-ROK relations to "what it is supposed to be," but that he had encountered serious obstacles. Lee said it was up to the Koreans to overcome those obstacles, but that it would be better if the U.S. showed its willingness to help. The Ambassador, General Sharp and Minister Lee agreed that by working together and understanding one another's points of view, the USG and ROKG would ultimately succeed in resolving our current Alliance concerns. END SUMMARY

¶2. (C) General Walter "Skip" Sharp, the new Commander, United Nations Command, Combined Forces Command, U.S. Forces Korea (UNC/CFC/USK) paid an introductory office call on the ROK Minister of National Defense, General (ret.) Lee Sang-hee on June 10, 2008. General Sharp told Minister Lee he was honored to be serving as UNC/CFC/USFK Commander and that he considered it his solemn responsibility to keep our combined forces ready to fight and win should conflict with North Korea ever recur. He stated that his predecessor, General Bell, had done much to strengthen the U.S.-ROK Alliance and that it was his intent to build on that, saying he wanted to

make the Alliance even more prepared as we look to the future.

¶3. (C) Minister Lee warmly welcomed General Sharp to the Republic of Korea. He said he had reviewed the CFC war plans and was confident the U.S. and ROK militaries knew what to do to further strengthen their combined defense. He also expressed confidence that General Sharp had come to the job well-prepared, and with an excellent grasp of the big picture. The Minister then described three missions he felt were essential for a good CFC Commander:

-- First, to prepare the CFC readiness posture to deter aggression from the North.

-- Second, to prepare the "co-military structures" that will replace the CFC when wartime operational control (OPCON) is transferred to the ROK military on April 17, 2012.

-- Third, to manage ROK-U.S. issues in ways that would help to strengthen the Alliance in the future.

¶4. (C) Lee stressed that the Korean operational commanders who fall under the Commander of CFC would view General Sharp as their commander, and not solely as Commander of U.S. Forces Korea. "It is therefore important that you act as Commander of CFC, and not merely as Commander of USFK," Lee urged, adding that he hoped General Sharp would approach political-military issues from that broader perspective as well. General Sharp agreed that he would follow Lee's advice, pointing out that he would in fact be visiting a number of ROK units in his capacity as CFC Commander over the next few weeks.

¶5. (C) General Sharp went on to explain that he intended to work closely with General Kim Tae-young, the Chairman of the ROK Joint Chiefs of Staff, on development of the new supported and supporting war plans to be prepared and trained in advance of the OPCON transfer in 2012. He said he was taking that approach so that all would see that the Alliance continues to be strong as we move forward on implementing the OPCON agreement. He also pledged to pay due attention to political, economic and diplomatic factors in his conduct of his responsibilities, so that the Alliance would become politically stronger by the end of the year.

¶6. (C) As he has at other meetings with senior U.S. officials, Defense Minister Lee then spoke at length to General Sharp and Ambassador Vershbow on the need for Seoul and Washington to update their perceptions of one another in order to better understand and more effectively address competing concerns. "We must do a better job of taking each other's cultures into account," Lee said. Referring back to the ROK Presidential Election of 2002, he argued that former-President Roh Moo-hyun would never have come to power if it hadn't been for poor handling of the accident in which two Korean school girls were run over by a U.S. Army vehicle. Lee faulted USFK's legal focus on the case, stating that greater sensitivity to the politics of the situation would have been wiser. Linking that incident to the candlelight vigils that have been taking place in Seoul this month, Lee pointed out that while the sentiments being expressed by the Korean public may be difficult for Americans to understand, it was important that we do so. He stated that even he was somewhat puzzled by what was happening, noting that it would be unthinkable for a U.S. President to be expected to fire his cabinet members after a mere 100 days in office, but that the reality of the situation is that Koreans think it is imperative.

¶7. (C) Minister Lee said that after retiring from the military he had spent time in the United States at the Brookings Institution's North East Asia Policy Center, where he had tried to gain a better understanding of U.S. perspectives. He said that he had concluded that Americans are generally too impatient and cautioned that further domestic political problems could arise in South Korea "if we try to solve things with an American mindset."

¶ 8. (C) General Sharp responded that Washington does want to understand Korea today, and is working to do just that, but that the perceptions the U.S. Congress has of Korea are also very important. He pointed out that Koreans in turn need to understand the impact their actions are having on Congressional support for funding issues and other important bilateral concerns. He concluded that effective management of Alliance issues requires that both the ROK and U.S. perspectives be balanced together when we make recommendations to our leadership. Lee agreed. He pointed out that in that respect General Sharp's "combined" role put him in a more difficult position than either himself or the Ambassador because the CFC Commander needed to act as if he were half Korean and half American. "You are the Joker in the deck of cards," Lee added. That is good, General Sharp replied, for I can take advantage of both aspects of my job.

¶ 9. (C) After asking about General Sharp's family, inquiring about his hobbies, and encouraging him to get out and see as much of Korea as possible, MND Lee concluded with the message that he and ROK President Lee Myung-bak were sincerely working to bring back the U.S.-ROK relationship to "what it is supposed to be," but that they had already encountered significant obstacles to their plan. He said it was up to the Korean Government and its people to overcome those obstacles, but asked that the U.S. be willing to help. "As we work to resolve Alliance concerns, we should do so from the standpoint of commonly perceived goals, and not let anti-American groups use those issues against us," Lee urged.

In his reply, General Sharp said he was confident that by working together, and understanding one another, the U.S. and ROK would succeed in resolving all concerns. General Sharp then pledged that he was willing to do all he could to achieve that. "Me too," Minister Lee replied, "If I am still the Defense Minister," he quickly added, for along with the rest of the cabinet he had been required to submit his resignation letter the previous day. General Sharp concluded his call on the MND by saying that he sincerely hoped Minister Lee would be allowed to continue on in his job. He and the Ambassador also expressed the hope of the USG that when the President visits Korea we would be able to address opportunities and not just issues.

VERSHBOW